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The author expresses the view that historical and social science research in adult education should be complementary but separate. He asserts that interpretive, humanistic adult education history should be oriented toward "the unique, the particular, and the individual," with statistical analysis and other scientific methodology preferably confined to social science studies. (ly)

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HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE: COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES TO ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH

A Paper Presented At

The Tenth National Seminar On Adult Education Research

Toronto, Canada

February 9-11, 1969

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Back in the "good old days" of the early 1900's adult education was a wild-swinging, freewheeling, hurly-burly affair. The people in the social settlements were trying to educate the middle class to its responsibilities toward the poor and the minorities. Other adult educators were busy trying to educate the minorities and the poor to their responsibilities to the middle class, that is, to the nation as defined by the middle class. It was total chaos. No one philosophy held sway in adult education - unless it was anarchy. Methods, techniques, and devices were primitive. A number of surveys were taken, conditions reported and legislation offered. But research was less evident than commitment to "saving America."

Understandably, a reaction set in and people came to view adult education as requiring a more orderly and reasoned approach. During this period, the social sciences rose to prominence in adult education research. Although social science researchers as late as the 1950's and perhaps even today have thought of adult education as a morass of organizations striving ineffectively to achieve conflicting goals, adult education today is pristine, neat and orderly when compared to thirty to sixty years ago.

Social science research has helped bring some order out of the chaos of adult education. Different adult education organizations have a better understanding now of their clientele, some tested organizational concepts, and more sophisticated approaches to program evaluation. We even have efforts to provide for standardized terminology apparently

necessary to a profession, such as the distinctions suggested for defining what are methods, techniques, and devices in our field. This creation of order that channels the individualistic spirit into reasonable boundaries and encourages an interest in group effort and professional goals is, I think, a major contribution of the social sciences.

I am wondering now, though, whether adult education research may not, philosophically, be headed too much in the direction of a sense of order, an interest in numbers and the group, and a drive to render adult education scientific. In order to balance this emphasis in our field, it seems to me that historical research - in its humanistic orientation - may have considerable value to adult education, if allowed to operate independently of social science philosophy and methodology. It is particularly important that the distinction between history and social science be presented in the adult education research conference because in our field it is likely to be professors oriented to social science who will be developing the historians of adult education. And I urge social scientists to consider carefully the philosophical distinction I suggest when dealing with advisees interested in writing history.

My thesis is that history's orientation should be toward the unique, the particular, and the individual. The traditional interest of historians in the biography and the narrative reflects the orientation of history toward the individual and toward the humanities. Social science, on the other hand, often tends to deal with the quantitative and to seek central tendencies. It is often interested in ordering phenomena according to some impersonal model. It is prepared to discard the unique as an aberration.

History and social science thus have completely different roles to play, different philosophies under which to operate, different rhetoric, different standards, different approaches, and even different ways of thinking about the same subjects. Both of these differing philosophies are necessary in adult education, I contend. Indeed, history and social science can complement each other in studying the interaction of the individual and his environment. But, and this is my point, in order to fulfill its distinctive role, history must be treated as a discipline independent from social science.

If a student of adult education comes to an historian expressing an interest in studying aspects of extension merger, for example, he is unlikely to find himself encouraged to think about doing a statistical analysis, or to think of analyzing the data he seeks in terms of a model of organizational innovation. These ways of thinking about a subject are, and I think should remain, the province of social scientists. The historian, acting on a different philosophy from social science, is likely to encourage the student to find out all he can about his subject, then to put his feet up on the table and tell a story - a story that puts extension merger into a broad cultural context. The historian would not ask the student to confine himself to reciting the facts. Instead, he would encourage him to interpret these facts in line with the student's own philosophical point of view. In other words, consistent with logic and reason, the humanistic historian would see validity in research that returns adult education in some measure to that hurly-burly of yesterday

when individualism was rampant. I contend that the cool, dispassionate, sometimes completely bland nature of today's adult education research needs to be balanced with humanistic history and philosophy.

When I became interested in studying the merger of agricultural and general extension, I didn't worry about statistics, predictions, and models of the various approaches taken to extension merger throughout the world. I wanted to put an existing phenomenon into the perspective of time and tell a story about extension merger and the people involved in it to the best of my ability as honestly and excitingly as the available facts allowed. I limited my study to the University of Wisconsin where I found that extension merger was largely the plan of University President Fred Harvey Harrington. His was the crucial role in bringing about extension merger there, as I interpreted the evidence. I found that there was nothing new about the concept of merging the extension units. It had been attempted by University of Wisconsin presidents almost from the beginning of extension activities. As I analyzed the data within the context of my narrative, I tried to show that extension merger occurred at Wisconsin in 1965 because of the convergence of a number of factors: the diminishing power of the farm bloc to impede a merger, Harrington's leadership, his desire for the university to play a larger role in U.S. society, and demands from the United States Congress for tighter administration if federal funds were to support broader responsibilities for extension. Merger in extension was effected in Wisconsin in 1965 not so much because it was suddenly an educationally sound approach but because

it became a wise move politically for the advancement of the institution.

My job as an historian was to tell a story about a particular institution and set of individuals in an interesting and literate way. For history is an art in which form is just as important as content. It would kill history to straitjacket its presentation in a standard social science pattern describing, in order, "The Nature of the Problem," "The Purpose of the Study," "The Plan of the Study," "The Sources of Data," "Conclusions of the Study," "Implications of the Study," "Limitations of the Study," and "Recommendations for Further Research."

My study discussed change in the University of Wisconsin over a period of time and set a broad social context within which this change occurred. I interpreted this change according to my own philosophical point of view. This is as it should be. Interpretive, humanistic history should provide for an interaction of the individual historian's values with the facts. Historians like William A. Williams and Staughton Lynd will interpret American foreign policy in a manner far different from George Kennan or Julius Pratt. The same thing will be true of different historians of adult education. It's interesting that some social scientists question the introduction of such individual biases, as they term them, while failing to be concerned that social science methodology introduces group biases. To subject one's findings to a panel - good social science methodology - may result in replacing individual bias with the bias of the group norm. To borrow a scientific framework on which to hang one's conclusions runs the risk of force-fitting the data to the model. The very decision to use statistical methodology - to deal in numbers - is a bias against the individual and the unique.

It is this interest of the historian in the individual and the unique, his interest in the blending of facts and values, his somewhat different way of thinking about man and society that should be accepted, I believe, as a necessary balance in adult education research. The humanistic historian's orientation may even help return to our field more of that zest and excitement which it possessed in earlier years. I think adult education would stand to gain more than it would lose by encouraging humanistic historical study.

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